Change in Chaos: Seven Lessons Learned from Katrina

by Alison A. Carr-Chellman, Brian Beabout, Khaled A. Alkandari, Luis C. Almeida, Husra T. Gursoy, Ziyan Ma, Rucha S. Modak, and Raymond S. Pastore

Understanding change is a lifetime's work. And for most of us, its intricacies remain elusive. One way to try to understand change is through the lens of chaos. What happens in chaos, and after chaos when changes are sincerely sought? What can we learn about future efforts at change based on the chaotic events of the past? And what, if anything, might we learn about the general process of change that could prove useful, regardless of whether we face change in moments of chaos or in moments of calm? We want to reflect on these questions by examining the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in the New Orleans public schools—a system widely considered among the worst in any big city in the United States (Inskeep 2005).

Although studies of large school reforms of the past have been undertaken in this country (Berman and McLaughlin 1974; Newmann and Wehlage 1995; Elmore and Burney 1997), a common critique of much of this type of school-change research concerns its insufficient attention to the role of teachers and principals intimately involved in enacting reforms (Riley 2000; Fink 2003). Thus, our interest was directed at those on the front lines of change in post-Katrina New Orleans schools—teachers, administrators, and school board members. By and large, educators' past experiences with planned change, while occasionally positive, have been overwhelmingly disappointing (Cuban 1990; Ravitch 2000) and characterized by lack of meaningful participation (Fullan 1993, 2001), failure to take local context into account (Stein, Hubbard, and Mehan 2004), and loss of professional identity (Evans 1996; Fink 2003).

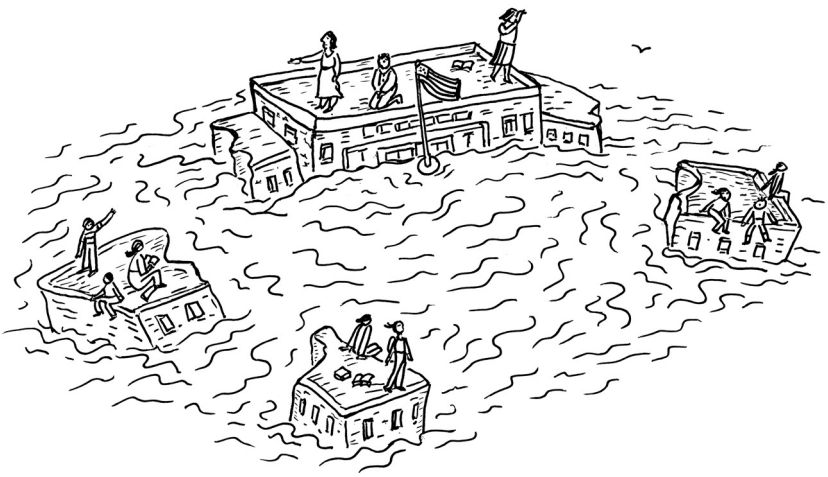
None of the large-scale school reforms in this nation have involved reacting to a natural disaster that displaced more than fifty thousand students, forced the initial closing of 100 percent of a district's buildings,

and resulted in an urban district that consists of more than 50 percent charter schools. Educator perceptions of change in this unique context may provide some much-needed immediate information to those who seek school reform in New Orleans. But we also anticipate that these reflections will be more broadly useful to those who face crisis-oriented change due to No Child Left Behind, legislative takeovers, taxpayer revolts, the influx of charter schools or vouchers, or any number of other possible turbulent triggers, including natural disasters, for significant and immediate change in a school system.

In the face of this unprecedented chaotic event in the life of a school system, we have distilled what we learned from talking to educators and administrators in post-Katrina New Orleans to seven lessons:

1. After chaos—there is hope
2. After chaos—there is a strong atmosphere of indeterminacy
3. After chaos—things tend to break apart and reform in somewhat similar ways but with different values
4. After chaos—there is a desire for organization, leadership, and familiarity
5. After chaos—there is a sense of loss
6. After chaos—the old problems are still there
7. After chaos—the larger culture still bears on the system

We want to reflect on these lessons using educators' voices and by exploring how the experience of school change in post-Katrina New Orleans intersects with the broader literature on change so that a deep discussion of change after chaos might help to inform future efforts to change school systems.



Lesson #1: There is hope

To better understand change after chaos, we completed an empirical study (Beabout et al., forthcoming) that led us to find three central themes from the New Orleans experience. Currently there is, first, an atmosphere of uncertainty in New Orleans; second, a mix of hope and cynicism about the future; and finally, a surprising lack of revolutionary change. From these three themes, we have extracted seven specific lessons we believe are critical to understanding change in chaos, and perhaps change as an enterprise even in the absence of chaos. Naturally, these themes are woven throughout all the lessons, but we believe that these reflections can deeply affect those who seek to facilitate and analyze change in the future.

Despite all the failings urban public schools have exhibited over the years, people still cling to them as the best hope of social renewal. As Tyack and Cuban noted more than a decade ago: "The belief that better schools make a better society—the deeply ingrained utopian conviction about the importance of schooling—is alive and well" (1995, p. 14). This optimism, despite performance that is less than stellar, characterizes much of what educators have said about the post-Katrina New Orleans public schools.

Early on, some educators envisioned a new school system that would bring back the middle-class and white students who had left the district in great numbers over the past thirty years. A state education official, Leslie Jacobs, said:

> New Orleans Public Schools were above 90 percent African-American, and very high percentage poverty. The middle class had abandoned New Orleans' Public Schools. So you're gonna end up with a city public school system that was more than 90 percent African-American, at least when it starts reopening, it's gonna be closer, I think, and this is just a guess, but it's gonna be closer to 50-50, it's gonna be, you know, it's gonna be more racially equal. . . . (Inskeep 2005)

Nonetheless, enrollments returned to their pre-Katrina demographics by fall 2006 (Ritea 2006b). If reforms take hold in the post-Katrina district, it will probably be with the same students who attended the schools prior to the storm. But that has not stopped many from cautious optimism regarding change. For those who had toiled in a system in which only one in four students graduated from high school, the hope that Katrina had a silver lining was obvious:

> Here you have this opportunity—this kind of clean slate—let's talk about what education should be, let's create—ya know—let's

> be idealistic about it, create, create something that works. (New Orleans charter school principal, in Beabout et al., forthcoming)

The transition from the utopian planning process in the immediate wake of the storm, before any public schools had opened, contrasted sharply with more pragmatic concerns, such as having enough available seats and classrooms—almost as if the longer reopening were delayed, the better the chances would be for implementing meaningful changes. Even those who expected positive changes immediately were wary about the long-term success of the reforms:

> I think initially it's gonna be much better, but you have to realize that the Recovery School Districts are only taking the schools over for five years. Then the Orleans Parish School Board gets them back and they become the huge school system in the area. And if they're run the way they were run previously, not a lot's gonna change; we'll be right back where we started. (former New Orleans Public School principal, in Beabout et al., forthcoming)

Such statements indicate that if administrators of the old system reacquire important roles in the new system, successful reforms could be contaminated and doomed to fail. This idea follows the pattern described by Tye (2000): changes to schools that seek to alter the deep structure of schooling (reliance on tests, age grading, compartmentalized curriculum) tend to be reversed within five years of implementation. If the new system is to gain approval from important stakeholder groups, it will need to differentiate itself from the old system in its communications strategies, management practices, and performance. The plans presented thus far by the mayor's committee and the state have not convinced all participants that the new system will differ significantly from the previous one. Although educators continue to hope for positive change, they also realize that the district's troubled past will be a constant impediment to and potential enemy of reform.

Lesson #2: The effects of indeterminacy

Multiple research visits to New Orleans by Beabout et al. (forthcoming) confirm the uncertainties of living in post-Katrina New Orleans. The initial hazards included disrupted mail, spotty communication, unreliable utility services, disrupted social networks, skyrocketing housing costs, and increased levels of violent crime. Although life has become more normal as time moves on, the indeterminacy of life in New Orleans remains.

Predicting student enrollment is a task central to planning in any school district (Hartman 1999). The uncertainties surrounding the return of New Orleans' population remain a topic of intense interest in the rebuilding process (Warner 2005; Hill and Hannaway 2006; Troeh

2006; Ritea 2007b) because the number of returning children is a key to the funding available for hiring teachers and opening school buildings. The future of the school system rests on the decisions of thousands of families spread out across the country. The inability even to estimate returning population loomed large to educators discussing their experiences with change:

> Again, the whole problem and the most confusing thing is that nobody really knows what the whole system and the whole city will be like in the next twelve months. . . . [W]e have a staff meeting and we talk about doubling or tripling enrollment. How many students can our school handle? How many faculty would we have to hire? What would it look like? What classes would we offer? . . . You know, I can't honestly imagine everything because all of the variables make me imagine chaos. (interview with a charter school teacher, in Beabout et al., forthcoming)

As of January 2007, student enrollment and the number of schools were still at less than half their pre-Katrina levels (Bohrer 2007). That initially limited the job prospects for teachers looking to return to the city. Although the lack of jobs for teachers would soon reverse course into an overabundance of students and a severe lack of qualified teachers (Bohrer 2007; Ritea 2007a), such unpredictability has made school change a struggle. The need for security is fundamental for most people, learners as well as educators. Policymakers must at least acknowledge these concerns before progress can be made. In the end it is *people* who reform schools, and educational leaders ought to attend to their needs, both professional and personal.

Lesson #3: Breaking apart and reforming in rather familiar ways but often with different values

After the New Orleans school system literally broke apart and drowned, it re-emerged from the waters with largely familiar structures, schools, and various forms of districts and leadership. However, a decidedly different set of values played out on the contested terrain of public, charter, and private schools after the flood.

As of November 2006, the once-monolithic New Orleans Public Schools had been broken up into a collection of subentities with varying types of governance; only 11 percent of the city's students attended the six schools still controlled by the elected school board. Another 36 percent attended twenty-three independently run charter schools, 18 percent attended the eight schools run by the Algiers Charter School Association, and 35 percent attended seventeen schools run temporarily by the state via the Recovery School District. Although the New Orleans

school system had floundered under poor district-level leadership prior to Katrina (Roesgen 2005), the familiarity of this organizational hierarchy was replaced by hundreds of decision-makers, each responsible for their own small pieces of the district. And although some reformers have argued that choice and competition are linchpins of educational reform in the United States (Chubb and Moe 1988), some New Orleans educators saw the new patchwork system as a political battleground for control of the city's schools, not a design for improving student learning:

> [W]e [the Mayor's education committee] put in all this time and effort and we came up with a plan that was a good plan, and none of it's gonna happen because here you have the state and Orleans in this little power struggle, who are not willing to kind of move forward. (interview with a charter school principal, in Beabout et al., forthcoming)

This principal clearly views reorganization as a political approach rather than a conscious effort to improve schools in the city. If the power balance shifts, as is likely when the state-run Recovery School District is reevaluated in 2010, educators can expect another round of reorganization that will divert attention from issues of instructional improvement. Although much of the district may still resemble other American school systems, the structure of the district is now based on competition, not the pre-hurricane publicly run guidelines. Although this shift has allowed for more varieties of schools, and a few locations where radically new kinds of classrooms can exist, the culture of low expectations, for example, is still a reality for many students. Many observers have heralded New Orleans' shift to charters and privatization, and even outsourcing to a fragmented array of service providers, as one of the great market-based experiments in public education. Others consider it an affront to the public good. The United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries writes, "By discarding the central school district after the Hurricane, the Louisiana legislature threw away the common good for New Orleans' children" (UCC 2008, p. 2). Oddly enough, the shift is nearly identical to many of the reforms identified in the schools of Eastern Europe after the fall of communism in the 1990s (Klus-Stanska and Olek 1998; Kozakiewicz 1992).

After chaos, then, the system re-emerges, even though partly recognizable, in a way that reflects the values of those in power at that moment. Thus chaos allows new political forces to infiltrate the system, and regardless of how much schools seek the comfort of familiar routines and structures, the new philosophical leanings inevitably conflict with old patterns of system behavior—a classic case of Lewin's (1951) "unfreezing" of a system, but when the system re-freezes and solidifies in a market-oriented

system that may not emphasize the common good, where can it go from that point? To apply this lesson on change after chaos, we need to understand the atmosphere of indeterminacy that may block the way (see above) and the need for familiarity (see below). These needs can be met superficially by those in power who are still trying to impose their own agendas within the public school space. It is important not to lose our way among low-level needs and miss the point that schools are being reformed within a very different, even problematic, value system. Instead we must critically analyze the unfolding of change, which is never politically neutral (Cherryholmes 1988), and continually ask of the evolving system, "Who is well served and who is ill served by this change?"

Lesson #4: A desire for organization, leadership, and familiarity

Lack of coordination between the city and the district has compounded the uncertainties already present in New Orleans. Local educators have understandably expressed a desire to work in a system with coherent, unified leadership that brings people together in the common cause of improving schools.

> They need to be organized and put their acts together and be organized and have some kind of vision. . . . The point of having a district is . . . to have some kind of guiding vision or consistency, or some assurance that . . . our kids are going to be taken care of. (interview with a charter school teacher, in Beabout et al., forthcoming)

The desire for "assurances" and "consistency" clashes with the new system in which schools can do things their own way. The transformation has created unease in teachers unfamiliar with this type of school management.

> The school takeover might have been great, as far as they [state legislators] are concerned, but as far as I'm concerned they have shot themselves in the foot. You have teachers that want to teach but are afraid they have to go to a charter school. You have no tenure, you have no guarantee of a job the following year. . . . [E]ven if you're jumping through hoops there's still no guarantees that your principal will re-hire you. (interview with a charter school teacher, in Beabout et al., forthcoming)

The marginalization of the teachers union and the unfamiliarity of many educators with the new school and district management schemes undercut teachers' roles in the new system. If teacher commitment to change is a key ingredient for successful schools (Rosenholtz 1989;

Fullan 2001), there may be additional hurdles for the majority of New Orleans teachers, who must now work in charter schools with unfamiliar management patterns, insecure futures, and questionable motives for the long term. To move forward within this chaos, its promoters must both recognize the need for familiarity and pay close attention to the need for structure and leadership, two aspects of familiarity that will help everyone within the changing system move past a sense of loss (which we discuss next).

Lesson #5: A sense of loss

Working conditions for teachers in urban schools have been notoriously poor for some time (Abel and Sewell 1999), but those conditions, over time, become the backdrop for people's professional lives and professional identities. Any change in the structure of schools, regardless of how beneficial it seems to reformers, is likely to bring with it some sense of uncertainty and loss (Evans 1996). Changes in salaries from a standardized union-bargaining agreement to a more market-based structure have made some teachers reconsider the attractiveness of teaching in New Orleans:

> The thing that worries me the most about the charter schools is that I really think you're gonna get people in there and then after a few weeks they're gonna quit. I've already seen it at [my school]. They [the charter teachers] come in, they think it's gonna be great, they [administrators] tell them their salary is something, they get their first paycheck and they're like, *There's no way, I can't even pay my new car that I had to buy . . . and my house note, there's no way.* (interview with a charter school teacher, in Beabout et al., forthcoming)

Compared to many other service-industry jobs in New Orleans, teaching was a reliable job that came with a pension, job security, and a regular paycheck. All that has changed in the post-Katrina system, and educators are naturally experiencing a loss in this shift, even though many educators, learners, leaders, and the general public no doubt recognize that the pre-Katrina system was substandard. Understanding that loss, recognizing it, and integrating solutions into an overall plan for change after chaos are keys to moving forward effectively. These lessons are interwoven as we recognize that people's needs for understanding, empathy, security, stability, structure, and leadership coexist with the dynamics of power, politics, and agendas overlaid on the restoration project.

Lesson #6: The old problems are still there

Magnet schools had already created inequalities in the pre-Katrina system, and it is now evident that the current decentralized system

allows even more room for differentiation among schools. Although the results of these changes are not immediately known, it is certain that some schools, most likely the state-run RSD schools, will suffer the compounding consequences of inferior buildings, inferior faculty, inferior resources, and students with more challenges. The differences in working conditions among schools in the new system are signs that the inequalities of the past have not washed away entirely.

Many New Orleanians initially hoped that the disappearance of the poorly functioning system would allow for a rebirth of a system that had tarnished the city's reputation for decades. When an Orleans Parish teacher said, "This is one way to start over" (Sanchez 2005), one heard expectations that the problems of the old system would be erased and a new system of schooling built in its place. Even Bill Roberti, a consultant whose tumultuous turnaround work with the St. Louis Public Schools should have alerted him to the challenges inherent in changing an urban school system, stated that New Orleans would be starting over with "a clean sheet of paper" (Merrow 2005). Where the political nature of the old system kept many incompetent employees in positions that hurt the system's performance, that top-heavy bureaucracy has been compared to the structure of the state-run Recovery School District, controlled by a superintendent from the state department of education. Legislating or mandating better schools into existence might, by now, seem questionable, but by and large it is being tried yet again in New Orleans, instead of nurturing and developing effective schools and educators. Broad cultural shifts do not happen quickly, and only as a result of leadership from the business community, from religious organizations, and from families, in addition to schools.

A concern of some participants was that the current mood of instant accountability in education would hamper some necessary long-term changes:

> [P]eople need to be patient and realize that school change is not going to happen overnight. Um, and like giving programs a chance to work, not just saying like OK, it didn't work for this one year so we need to scrap this whole thing. Figuring out what actually works and what doesn't. You know having, like, long-term goals instead of short term,, knowing which needs to be adjusted. (interview with a former charter school teacher, in Beabout et al., forthcoming)

The state has given the Recovery School District a commitment: five years of state control before returning those schools to district control can be considered. Charter schools generally enjoy a similar period before their charters are subject to re-approval. Whether the public and

the media will be as patient is unknown. This lesson on change after chaos is made clearer by pointing out that within the New Orleans reformation, the schools remain underfunded and understaffed, with fewer qualified teachers than is optimal. Curricular and instructional improvements have been minimal (Chamberlain 2006).

One university researcher who has observed New Orleans schools for more than twenty years points out that the school system lacked consensus regarding school reform before Katrina, and post-Katrina it rapidly gravitated to a "flexible, privately governed model—away from the public school board, a majority-black, elected school board, and put it in the hands of independent private organizations" (Chamberlain 2006, p. 1). However, the old problems remain, and the community has still not coalesced around a vision for its schools; instead, the state takeover has meant far less power in local hands. Thus, in the case of New Orleans, the shifts have exacerbated rather than resolved many of the old problems.

In taking on change or creating new structures in the midst of chaotic events, we should remember that shifting power will not make old problems disappear. Whether private businesses, elected officials, or local leaders are in charge of the schools, there will still be children who have extra needs, community members will likely still lack consensus about the role of schools, and all the structural realities that cause poverty, lack of opportunity, and community disintegration will remain. Examining these long-term problems in the larger local culture will be essential in any change effort, whether post-chaos or not.

Lesson #7: The larger culture still bears on the system

Uncertainty in New Orleans has ranged from locating missing family members and discovering the condition of one's home to addressing uncertainties about the school system and educators returning to their jobs. This collection of uncertainties, both inside and outside schools, makes up what DeGreene (1996) calls a *societal field*, which "emerges out of the myriad person-person and person-machine interactions of a sociotechnical system" and "shows such characteristics as collective mind, collective intelligence, collective perception, collective belief structures, and collective anxiety" (p. 280). There is indeed a collective anxiety about what life is going to be like in New Orleans. In fact, almost a month into the 2006–2007 school year—at a time when the city's school enrollment was only 36 percent of the pre-Katrina figures—almost 15 percent of teaching jobs in the Recovery District remained vacant (Ritea 2006a).

Examining the past century of public school reform, Tyack and Cuban (1995) note: "Americans have used discourse about education to articulate and instill a sense of the common good. But overpromising has often led to disillusionment and to blaming schools for not solving

problems beyond their reach" (p. 3). Tyack and Cuban correctly identify both the positive and negative attitudes we often hold toward our public schools. These attitudes may be even stronger in urban districts, where the need for social change is greater than elsewhere and where schools seem to fall short of our expectations more often. Modern urban schools are supposed to feed, clothe, heal, educate, socialize, and train students in six hours a day with inadequate public funding. Thus the pressures of NCLB and rescuing an ailing system are mandates to the New Orleans school system within the larger cultural system of expectations: public schools as a public good. Change after chaos requires careful examination of both the current and the past cultural soup in which the schools exist. Understanding what came before is important because, as we have discussed, the old problems will still exist, and in the case of chaos, new ones will appear. They can be obstacles or perhaps opportunities, but they must be dealt with for the system to move on. Thus careful recognition and examination of the current and past larger culture, while they may seem luxuries, are essential to change in chaos.

What do the lessons mean?

Time magazine, reporting in September 2007 on New Orleans public schools as "The Greatest Education Lab," singled out several reformers, notably Paul Vallas of Chicago and Philadelphia school-reform fame, as sources of innovation and change. The notion of the greatest experiment in American education has been touted many times post-Katrina, and once more we learn that the schools are going to be re-organized with what Vallas calls "the greatest opportunity for educational entrepreneurs, charter schools, competition and parental choice in America" (Isaacson 2006). Given what we have learned about New Orleans schools currently and the lessons we have taken from the reform literature and change within chaos, we strongly advise reformers to consider these bits of advice:

- Make the most of the hope—it may be precious fuel for change.
- Attend to feelings of loss and drift.
- Watch for ways in which the system re-forms in familiar but value-laden ways; ask whom the new system serves well and whom it may serve ill.
- Know what the problems and culture of the past are so that you can recognize when the old problems return—as they inevitably will.
- Fill people's needs for structure, organization, leadership, and familiarity in ways that do not stunt the process of change.
- Whenever possible, empower people to own the system and maintain responsibility for it to help deal with larger cultural and systemic issues.

In the end, we believe that learning these lessons may be essential to those facing change after chaotic events, be they hurricanes, tsunamis, or political upheavals. And these lessons are not learned from fast-talking politicians, from for-profit vendors, or from charter school corporations: they can be learned only by really talking to and understanding the people who are in the system, who have been in the system most of their lives, and who will continue to be in the system. Some fear that might limit possibilities for innovation, but it becomes nearly impossible to understand the culture, what people are thinking, how the system can come back, *without* deeply discussing these issues with those who are there. The missed opportunity to use this inclusive approach is encapsulated by Brenda Mitchell, president of the United Teachers of New Orleans, in a recent interview:

> And I'd like to add that I think that there are some lessons to be learned from the aftermath of Katrina, for things that people said they should not do. . . . [Y]ou don't rush to redesign a system, excluding the very people from the table who are impacted by it the most. And that includes parents. And it includes teachers and school support staff. I think that we had an opportunity, and we've missed it. And we could have sat down and crafted a plan that would work for all of us. We could have used a set of resources to our benefit. And then, to talk about educators, they could lend us the kind of support that we need to get those research-based programs, to talk to people about the best ways of educating African American youngsters, the best ways of working with the urban poor, the best ways of how we can provide the social services that are direly needed for these kids—where they are now and when they come back home—and how we as a community, can put all of our resources together in order to do that. (Perry 2006)

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Alison A. Carr-Chellman, Ph.D., is a professor in the Instructional Systems program of the College of Education, Pennsylvania State University. Brian Beabout, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations at the University of New Orleans. Luis C. Almeida is an assistant professor of communication at Waynesburg (Pa.) University. Khaled A. Alkandari, Husra T. Gursoy, Ziyan Ma, Rucha S. Modak, and Raymond S. Pastore are graduate students in the Instructional Systems program of the College of Education, Pennsylvania State University.

The authors would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of David Magolis, Jane Klaus, Mona Capobianco, and Rose Marsh, also of the Instructional Systems program, in the data analysis portion of this project.